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ABSTRACT

This teaching guide for "Where the Lilies Bloom" provides an introduction, a plot summary, and a conclusion as background information. The guide furnishes questions for discussion which focus on plot, point of view, setting, characters, interpretation and symbolism, ethical questions, and conclusion. (NKA)

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by M. Katherine Grimes

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Where the Lilies Bloom: A Guide for Teachers

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Where the Lilies Bloom

by Vera and Bill Cleaver.

Lippincott, 1969. Rpt. by Scholastic, 1974.

Reissued by HarperCollins Children's Books, 1989.

Introduction

The first-person narration of 14-year-old protagonist Mary Call Luther of Trial Valley in North Carolina's Great Smoky Mountains makes Vera and Bill Cleaver's *Where the Lilies Bloom* a marvelous Appalachian novel for young people.

The motherless Mary Call leads her two sisters and brother through the illness and death of their father, the threat of losing their home, the danger of being separated, and the misery of an Appalachian winter. She shoulders the tasks of holding her family together and making sure they are fed, clothed, and sheltered; keeping her promises to her dying father; and keeping the secret of his death from the townspeople. The reader watches her struggle with the

reality of her life in contrast to the unrealistic promises she made to her father.

As the story begins, we are introduced to the other-worldliness of life in the Appalachian Mountains. Mary Call tells us, "Once in some near-forgotten time a traveler, winding his way across the mountains on foot, wandered into our valley which is known as Trial" (9). [1] The "near-forgotten time" might also be a "near-forgotten place," where traditional values run head-on into the modern world.

Plot Summary

Because her 18-year-old sister Devola is "cloudy headed," the dying Roy Luther turns over to 14-year-old Mary Call responsibility for her siblings, Romey, eleven, and Ima Dean, five, as well as Devola. He makes Mary Call promise to keep the family together, refuse charity, and keep Devola from marrying Kiser Pease, the neighbor for whom Roy Luther share-crops.

Mary Call has no problem making these promises, for she shares her father's devotion to the traditional values of family and pride, and she hates Kiser Pease, whose greed she blames for all the family's struggles.

Two bits of fortune buy the Luther children some time during their father's illness. First, Kiser Pease's near-fatal illness enables the Luther children to con him out of the family's house and property; they agree to save his life in return for a contract giving them the land and house. Then, Mary Call finds a book on

wild-crafting left by her late mother and uses it to search for medicinal plants in the mountains. She and her siblings sell the plants to a storeowner in town.

After Roy Luther dies, Mary Call and Romey bury him in the mountains and fend off nosy and well-meaning neighbors, including Kiser Pease. However, a frigid winter almost destroys their house, and an accident brings Kiser's sister to Trial Valley. The sister explains that Kiser never owned the Luther house; she does. She evicts the Luthers, forcing Mary Call to find a cave into which to move her family after Kiser rejects her desperate marriage proposal.

When the Luthers cannot fall any further, Kiser leaves the hospital, buys the Luther property from his sister, and returns it to the children. Mary Call begins to question the wisdom of her late father and eventually allows Devola to marry Kiser, who arranges to obtain custody of the younger children, allowing the family to remain together.

Conclusion

The clash of idealistic mountain traditions and the reality of a world in which children are orphaned provide a great deal of depth in a story that might at first seem formulaic: orphaned children suffer, fear discovery, and find salvation from a kind wealthy person who had appeared to be an enemy. Charles Dickens mined that plot richly. However, the conflict in *Where the Lilies Bloom* is not with the elements and the outside world alone: Mary Call must overcome not just nature and apparent enemies but also her own blind

loyalty to her misguided father, whose pride almost condemns his children to a life of suffering.

Discussion Questions

Plot, Point of View

- What impressions of the story do you get by having Mary Call tell it? How would the story be different if another character told it (Romey, Devola, Kiser Pease)? How would it be different if the narrator were outside the story and told about the thoughts of all the characters?
- Why does Mary Call write about this part of her life? Most of us don't write about our lives.
- In many stories, the hero is a boy or man. Do you think Mary Call's job would be easier if she were a boy? Do you think the story would be very different if she were a boy?
- Romey is a boy. Why do you think his father doesn't have him run the family?
- Mary Call is only fourteen. She isn't the oldest of the four Luther children. How would the story be different if Devola weren't "cloudy headed" or if Mary Call were the oldest?

- What do the Luther children think of people in the town? Do you as a reader have the same opinion of the townspeople? Are Mr. and Mrs. Connell nosy or concerned? What is the difference between nosiness and concern?
- If you were Mary Call, what would you have done differently?
- Why is the book called "Where the Lilies Bloom"? Explain the book's title.

Setting

- What is the importance of setting this book in the Appalachian Mountains? Could the same situation have happened in New York City? How would the book be different if it were set in a city?
- How important is the natural world in this book?
- Why does Mary Call want to know how old the Smoky Mountains are?
- Why is the place where the Luthers live called "Trial Valley"?
- Some people might say that Old Joshua and Sugar Boy are characters in the book. Do you agree?
- Do you think that the people in this book are like other people who live in the Appalachian Mountains? What experience or other literature helps shape your opinion? Do you think people

in other parts of the United States are similar to people who live in Appalachia or different from them?

Characters

- In the Old Testament, Joshua led the Israelites into Palestine after Moses died. He won the battle of Jericho to acquire Palestine for his people. What is the significance of naming the mountain Old Joshua after him?
- Martin Luther was a man who wanted to reform the Roman Catholic Church almost 500 years ago. He started the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther King was named for him. Do you think there is any significance to the Luthers sharing his name?
- "Kiser" is a word similar to "caesar" and "czar" and means "ruler." Does Kiser Pease's name fit him?
- Although the Luther children's mother, Cosby Luther, has died before the book begins, she is still important in the story. Explain her role.
- The mother is dead in many stories and books. (Examples include Mark Twain's The *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a*

Mockingbird, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, J. K Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, and the folk tale "Cinderella.")

- Why do you think so many authors create motherless children? How does the fact that the Luther children are motherless (and then orphaned completely) make the reader feel about them?

Interpretation, Symbolism

- Why is Mary Call so afraid of being ignorant?
- What is the plot significance of the Luther children's plan to move into a cave? What is the symbolic significance?
- At the beginning of the book, a traveler says that he had climbed Old Joshua and Sugar Boy "for the memory." Why does Mary Call tell that story? What is its significance?

Ethical Questions

- Why doesn't Roy Luther want Devola to marry Kiser Pease? Do you think Roy Luther is right not to want his daughter to marry Kiser?
- Mary Call tells Devola that she is being disloyal to her family by liking Kiser Pease. Is Mary Call right?
- Is Mary Call wrong to let Devola marry Kiser when their father told her never to let that marriage take place? Should a child ever disobey a parent's wishes? Should a person ever go

back on a promise? Is a promise to someone who has died different from a promise to a living person?

- Is Roy Luther wrong to make Mary Call promise not to take charity? Is it wrong to let other people help you?
- After Roy Luther dies, the children tell people he is "just fine" or "sleeping." Is it wrong for them to lie? Is lying ever justified?
- Are Mary Call's plans to marry Kiser Pease to get her father's land back wrong? Is it wrong to marry someone you don't love?
- There is a Greek play by Sophocles called Antigone (pronounced an-TIG-uh-nee) about a young woman whose uncle, the king, tells her not to bury her brother, who was killed in battle. Antigone disobeys her uncle because she believes there are higher laws than the ones people make. How is Mary Call like Antigone? Are there some laws that are higher than the ones made by governments?

Conclusion

- What has Mary Call learned by the end of the book?
- Do you think the book has a happy ending?

Footnotes

[1] All quotations are from the Scholastic publication.